

Students From Single-Parent Households: Their Issues & Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Single parenthood has been predicted as one of the causes of poor academic performance among school students. Most studies in Western countries reported that children of single-mother and single-father families perform academically lower than children of two-parent families. A phenomenological method of inquiry and analysis was used to explain the challenges and issues faced by students from single-parent households. In-depth interviews were conducted with five secondary school students at Klang Valley. The findings revealed that the students experienced five types of challenges: lack of parental guidance, grief of losing a parent, conflict between divorced parents, financial constraint, and societal perception. In overcoming the challenges, five strategies, which are talking to someone, listening to music, expressive writing, becoming more independent and feeling grateful were employed.

Keywords: challenges, issues, single-parent households

1. Introduction

A single-parent household consists of a father or a mother and a child or children resulting from divorce, loss of a parent, unmarried parent, separation, or abandonment (Azar, Naughton & Joseph, 2009). Single-parent household is an increasing phenomenon in modern society. There are a variety of reasons for the increasing number of single-parent households. In general, the high rate of divorce and non-marital childrearing has contributed to this phenomenon (Amato, Patterson & Beattie, 2015).

A large number of research in Western countries documented the relationship between parental divorce, single parenthood, and negative effects towards children. Compared to children living with both parents, children living with a single parent have been viewed as underprivileged in academic performance and emotional, behavioural, and psychological development (Awino et al., 2022; Bago, 2022; Adegboyega, 2019; Musa & Dosunmu, 2022; Hawkins, 2020). Fotoh (2021) concluded that children who experienced separation, divorce, or the death of a parent do not perform well or do not achieve academically. In relation to this scenario, there is a need to explore issues and challenges faced by secondary students from single-parent households that contribute to their poor academic performance.

2. Literature Review

The majority of studies related to students from single-parent households were conducted on secondary school students (Musa & Dosunmu, 2022; Bago, 2022; Bokhove & Thompson, 2022; Iheka, 2022; Perera, 2021; Rubamande & Mukadi, 2021; Xiong & Ye, 2021). Only a few studies were conducted on students in preschool, primary school, college, and university settings (Munir et al., 2021; Ngure et al., 2017; Chukwuka, 2018). Similarly, participants of this study were secondary school students from single-parent households. Almost all empirical studies on students from single-parent households employed quantitative research design (Balasubramaniam & Begum, 2022; Folorunsho & Tanga, 2022; Iheka, 2022; Perera, 2021; Adetutu & Adebayo, 2021; Munir et al., 2021; Rogers, 2020; Abrantes & Casinillo, 2020). There are limited number of studies that used qualitative research design and mixed-method design (Mrinde, 2014; Awino et al., 2022; Rubamande & Mukadi, 2021). Hence, this study employed a qualitative research design.

Many studies that were conducted were related to students from single-parent households and focused on the academic performance of students (Awino et al., 2022; Bago, 2022; Bokhove & Thompson, 2022; Iheka, 2022; Adetutu & Adebayo (2021), Munir et al., 2021; Abrantes & Casinillo, 2020). Some studies focused on students' development consisting of emotional, behavioural, and psychological aspects (Adegboyega, 2019; Musa & Dosunmu, 2022; Hawkins, 2020; Xiong & Ye, 2021). A moderate number of studies focused on psychological issues such as resilience, psychosocial well-being, and self-esteem (Linton, 2017; Folorunsho & Tanga, 2022; Hill & Roberts, 2019; Unamba, 2020). However, limited study focused on obstacles, challenges and difficulties faced by the students (Mrinde, 2014; Perera, 2021). Thus, this study focuses on issues and challenges faced by students from single-parent households.

The majority of study findings indicate that single parenting has a negative impact on student's academic performance (Awino et al., 2022; Bago, 2022; Iheka, 2022; Adetutu & Adebayo, 2021; Munir et al., 2021; Rogers, 2020). The underlying contributing factors are an unpleasant home environment, lack of parental supervision and necessary learning materials, and financial constraints. A study on the impact of poverty and parent's marital status on students' achievement showed that poverty influences academic achievement, not marital status (Jones & Clark, 2018). Furthermore, a study conducted by Abrantes and Casinillo (2020) found that there is no significant difference between the academic performance of students from single-parent homes and two-parent homes. Thus, it can be concluded that students from single-parent homes perform low in their studies due to financial constraints, not because of parental divorce.

In terms of development, students from single-parent households scored low on self-esteem, self-efficacy, and social skills (Adegboyega, 2019; Musa & Dosunmu, 2022; Hawkins, 2020; Hill & Roberts, 2019; Unamba, 2020). They reported high levels of relative deprivation, depression, and loneliness, as well as low levels of self-esteem due to financial constraints (Xiong & Ye, 2021). However, they have a good psychological adjustment (Meng et al., 2021). Healthy family functioning was found to be predictive of fewer distressing mental health symptoms, a higher level of life satisfaction, and a higher degree of self-confidence among high achievers of single-parent homes (Linton, 2017). Resiliency and optimism were also found to be predictive of these outcomes, with resiliency having the strongest predictive capabilities of all psychosocial factors.

Findings of a study by Mrinde (2014) also revealed that students from single-parent households experienced economic hardship, lack of parental care, lack of supervision and monitoring, lack

of guidance and counselling and socialisation. They experienced low parental involvement in their academic activities as their parents have multiple responsibilities, lack financial resources, and have no external help at home (Perera, 2021). Furthermore, 70% of the students expressed their dislike of attending school and engaging in academic work, and 88% of them claimed that they had lost confidence in their parents and their class teachers.

3. Research Methodology

In this study, the phenomenological method of inquiry and analysis was employed to identify and understand the processes experienced by students from single-parent households who had faced challenges and elucidate the meaning of challenges. A phenomenological approach is relevant for this kind of study as the approach focuses on the meaning of individuals' life experiences which are related to a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Marshall & Rosmann, 2011). Moustakas (1994) as cited in Creswell (2007) stressed that this approach is suitable as it describes "what" phenomenon experienced by participants of the study and "how" they experienced it. In the present study, the researchers describe the challenges faced by the students and how they overcome them.

Participants of this study comprise of five secondary school students: Amir, Suri, Devika, Rani, and Tan. All are pseudonyms. They were purposefully selected based on five inclusion criteria, which are: (a) secondary school student at Klang Valley, (b) from a single-parent household, (c) experienced challenges, (d) successful in overcoming the challenges, and (e) agrees to participate in the study. As suggested by Creswell (2007), criterion sampling is suitable for phenomenological study as the study participants represent people who had experienced the phenomenon.

Two steps were involved in the study in identifying the participants. First, the researchers employed a snowball sampling technique by requesting a student from a single-parent household known to have experienced challenges to suggest other students who have had the same experiences. Individuals suggested were contacted to identify whether they are interested in participating in the study and were also requested to suggest other students who have had similar criteria. Then, the students who were interested in participating in the study were approached via a phone call to set the date, time, and medium for the interviews.

All participants were interviewed face-to-face at their respective schools. In all interviews, the researchers used a semi-structured interview style with open-ended questions. Each interview was conducted for one to two hours. Before the real interview, the researchers piloted the interview questions to a student who was studying at a private secondary school. Next, the researchers revised the interview questions to conduct the real interview.

All interviews were recorded, and the recorded verbal interviews were transcribed after the interview, as proposed by Creswell (2009). Immediately after the interviews, analytic memos were written to document thoughts and insights and record formulations of themes and meanings (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Patton, 2002). The researchers transcribed the interviews by themselves to allow for continued immersion in the data. They kept additional analytic memos of the process as well as thoughts and reactions to the data.

Based on the interview transcriptions, the researchers highlighted significant statements, sentences or quotes that provide an understanding of how the participants experienced the

challenges. Next, the researchers developed clusters of meanings from the significant statements into themes. Then, the themes were used to write a description of what the participants experienced and how the experience happened. Finally, the researchers wrote a composite description that presents the essence of the phenomenon, which focuses on the common experiences of the participants. All the steps in analysing data were conducted based on suggestions given by Moustakas (1994) as cited in Creswell (2007).

4. Study Findings and Discussion

The results were organised into two predominant core aspects, namely, challenges experienced by the students and strategies in overcoming the challenges.

4.1. Challenges experienced by the students

4.1.1. Lack of parental guidance

Students from single-parent households feel that they do not get enough guidance from their parents when they do homework related to academic subjects. There are a few factors why parents do not guide them, such as low educational background and busy with work. However, their parents support them by providing things needed for their school projects, assisting them with projects and accompanying them to complete the projects until the end. Below are excerpts of the participants on the theme:

Suri mentioned, “My mother does not really help me with homework as she is not an educated woman, but she helps me with my arts project. She helps me draw and buy things needed for my arts (PSV) project and gives much support for the project. Sometimes, she stays up late till I complete my homework so that I will not fall asleep. She will always talk to me.

Devika stated, “My father does not really help much, but he would buy things needed for my art project if he had money. If he doesn’t, he will try hard to get money and then get the stuff needed for the project. He spends around two minutes when he comes back from work. After dinner, he would ask how school and the day went. Then, he continues doing his business.”

Tan tries to be independent by doing his homework and handling things related to his studies on his own. He does not want to burden his mother as she is busy with her job. He said, “Nope, I do not bother my mom with schoolwork as she is busy with her work. I do not want to put more burden on her shoulders. So, I would be more independent and settle things on my own.”

As for Rani, her mother used to help her with homework when she was in primary school. However, now, she does not help her anymore. This is because her mother must work double shifts to support their family. She also registered Rani for extra classes and paid for them. Rani stated, “She used to help me when I was in primary school. Now, she does not anymore. She taught me things I did not know during primary school. When I have problems with Maths, she helps me to solve them. Now, she does not really help or guide me with homework because she is busy with work, but she sends me to tuition. She spends a lot of money on my tuitions.”

Study findings by Perera (2021) and Tarumi (2017) indicate that students from single-parent households experience low parental involvement in their academic activities due to a lack of parenting resources such as discussions at home, supervision at home, and involvement in school.

Furthermore, study by Zhang (2019) show that children in single-mother families did not significantly differ from children in conflict-free intact families in academic performance or subjective well-being due to high parental involvement. In contrast, children living with single fathers were disadvantaged in academic performance and subjective well-being as their father's involvement level was lower.

4.1.2. Grief of losing a parent

Amir misses his late father and what his father used to do for him. His father used to send him to school and pick him up from school. When he went home, his father was there to spend time with him. Now, things have changed. He must go to school by using Grab services. This requires him to use his own pocket money. When he goes home, no one is waiting for him anymore. His mother is working.

Amir mentioned, *"There is not much challenge when I live with my mom. I miss my dad sometimes. My mom does everything for me, but the only thing is that I miss my dad."*

"I feel like life would have been easier if my dad was alive because he used to do everything for me, from sending me to school and fetching me after school. This is a challenge for me as now I have to rely on Grab services, which cost a lot of money. I have to learn and be brave on my own because it is tough for me to face the world without a dad as a teenager."

"I feel lonely sometimes because my mother goes to work, and when my father was alive, he would do many things for me, and there was somebody for me when I came back from school. Nevertheless, now, I miss him."

Children experience grief and loss due to parental death and divorce. They may experience challenges in recovery due to a lack of maturity and ineffective coping strategies (Ferow, 2019). They may also lack appropriate support networks to work through their grief, as their remaining parents or family members may also be suffering from grief. They are at risk for developing mental and physical health issues (Albuquerque & Santos, 2021). The mental health issues can manifest into psychiatric disorders when lacking coping skills.

4.1.3. Conflict between divorced parents

As for Tan, his parents divorced a few years ago. When they meet on any occasion, such as at Tan's birthday party or when they go out with Tan, they will always fight. He does not understand why they are always fighting. For him, dealing with their behaviour is more challenging than studying. Tan said, "Actually, I was not facing any challenges, but my parents are facing challenges, and there are conflicts between my mom and my dad. They are always fighting even though they are separated and do not live in the same house. This is by far the challenge that I have; the problem with study looks so small compared to this problem. Sometimes, I just do not get it; why do they have to fight." Exposure to frequent parental discordance can be damaging to children's well-being. Children are less happy, less confident, and more depressed when parents quarrel often in front of them (Zhang, 2019). Furthermore, findings of a study conducted by Visser et al. (2021) indicate that 110 parents referred their children to mental health care because the well-being of their children has been severely affected by their marital conflict.

4.1.4. Financial constraint

Devika's family faces financial issues due to her father's low income. He is a security guard. His income is not enough to support his family members. Due to financial issues, Devika's father could not afford to buy a car. Thus, they have difficulty commuting from one place to another. Devika mentioned, *"The challenge is that there is not enough money for my family. My father is not educated. He works as a guard. So, the pay is insufficient for all of us, which is the biggest challenge for me. Another issue is the transport problem. If we want to go out somewhere, transport is an issue for us."*

In line with study findings of Stack and Meredith (2018) and Roger (2022,) single parents are often less able to provide, support, and monitor their children effectively because financial issues overburden them. They are unable to balance work and family responsibilities successfully. This causes their children to perform poorly in studies (Tarumi, 2017). On the other hand, higher-SES parents use different parenting practices than lower-SES counterparts (Kalil & Ryan, 2020). They have more money to buy materials that enhance their children's well-being. Differences in spending on these types of materials directly affect children's development by enhancing the quantity and quality of their cognitive stimulation. Consequently, it affects parents' ability to invest time in enhancing their children's development.

4.1.5. Societal perception

Devika also faces challenges from her relatives. Her mother left her father because of another man. Thus, her relatives assume that she and her sisters will do the same when they grow up. They also highlight that Devika's cousins perform better in their studies. They keep mentioning that Devika and her sisters are burdening their father. Devika said, *"My relatives said many things about us. My dad has three daughters, and my mom ran away with another man when I was just four. So, my relatives would say that we will end up like our mother. Run away from home and things like that. They also compare us with our cousins in studies that they are doing better than us. I feel very angry sometimes when my relatives say that to us. Sometimes I do wonder if I am a burden to my dad. One day, we did confront dad regarding this matter, and he cleared the doubt."*

Society still views children raised in single-parent homes as problematic and a threat to social order. They are viewed as exhibiting more negative behaviours than children from two-parent homes (Fuller, 1986). Societal perceptions of children from single mothers and fathers varied primarily by gender of the single parent (Haire & McGeorge, 2012). Negative attributes assigned to single mothers were primarily personal, while the negative perceptions of single fathers appeared to be more situational. Children raised by single mothers were viewed as troublemakers who had lost values because they had no adult male to be their role models and to discipline them (Newlin, 2017).

4.2. Strategies to overcome the challenges

4.2.1. Talking to someone

In overcoming challenges, the students talk to significant others about their concerns and how they are feeling. Some of them talk to their mother when they are in a low state. Some talk to their friends and teachers. Suri described, *"I will talk to my mother I am feeling so nervous or if*

I feel like giving up. My mom advised me not to give up. I will ask for some advice from friends and teachers.” However, Tan is not comfortable sharing problems with his mother as he is worried that it will burden his mother. *“I do not really like to share things with my mother because she has a lot of other things to do and think of; I do not want to be a burden to her.”* Instead, Tan shared his issues with his elder brother. He stated, *“I will share with my brother, my second brother. He knows what I am going through, and we can relate to each other. He knows what I am talking about. My brother has the same mindset as me. I would also share with my church friends. They are good people.*

Nyarko (2010), and Rubamande and Mukadi (2021) found that social circles such as friends, family, and relatives at home contribute to students’ positive performance in their study. These direct surroundings have a noticeable influence on their academic performance. Strong emotional bonding among family members also can serve as a significant social support (Wirkus et al., 2021). When children have adequate social support from their families, it will foster the process of resilience reintegration. Hence, family cohesion has a strong relationship with resilience (Yee & Sulaiman, 2017).

4.2.2. Listening to music

The students use music as a therapeutic tool to reduce stress, promote healing, and improve their overall emotional well-being. They listen to music, watch music videos, play musical instruments, sing along to music, and write a song. They also do enjoyable activities such as watching dramas and playing games and toys with their family members. Furthermore, they practise relaxation techniques, meditation, and positive self-talk to cope with stressful situations.

Tan mentioned, *“Through past experiences, I think I will just listen to music as well as meditating at the same time. It tends to calm me down; playing the guitar or writing a song or something like that tends to relieve a lot of stress. If I am having a mental breakdown, music is often the cure for it.”*

Devika stated, *“I would calm myself down by breathing and meditating and turning on the music and talking to myself. I would also watch dramas or music videos, I would let myself out by going all out, turning the volume high, and dance to put out my anger and stress.”*

Suri said, *“I listen to music; I have some games and toys that I play with my sister.”*

Progressive muscle relaxation combined with music is effective in decreasing stress and fatigue (Ozgundodu & Metin, 2019). Listening to classical music leads to better stress recovery in comparison with listening to preferred relaxing music (Chennafi et al., 2018). Preferred relaxing music delays cardiovascular recovery due to its emotional impact on individuals. Those who performed tasks that involved emotion after encountering stressful events did not recover, whereas people who did not perform such tasks recovered. Meditation by means of yoga breathing and mindfulness meditation are also effective in decreasing stress and burnout (Hepburn & McMahon, 2017; Green, 2020). Interventions via meditation have been shown to significantly decrease stress, improve all aspects of burnout, and increase self-compassion and compassion satisfaction.

Expressive writing

For students, writing is a highly effective tool for stress relief. They write in detail about their thoughts and feelings on a piece of paper. They also write about stressful events that happened in their life. After finishing with writing their feelings, they throw the paper away. Some wrote what they had gone through on a notepad and kept it as a journal. Suri mentioned, *“I write and scribble things on a piece of paper. Whenever I feel like writing or scribbling, I will do it. Then, later I will throw the paper away.”* Rani stated, *“I write things down on a notepad. Write everything that I am going through to calm my nerves. It helps me to get things right.”* Expressive writing and drawing are effective strategies for reducing anxiety and stress among children undergoing cancer treatment and university athletes (Altay et al., 2017 & Jannah et al., 2019). The strategies are also convenient and inexpensive means of reducing levels of postpartum depression and stress among mothers with a preterm infant in a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (Rabiepoor et al., 2020).

4.2.3. Trying to be independent

Students often try to be more independent in their ways. They do not want to burden their single parents as their parents have lots of responsibilities to carry. They try to do things on their own, such as booking a Grab and flight tickets and buying things using their own pocket money. They want others to recognise that they can do things on their own.

“Before my dad passed away, life was so easy for me. Because he used to do everything for me, from sending me to school to fetching me after school. This, too, is a challenge for me as now I have to rely on Grab. I learned to do things on my own and not disturb my mother for simple things like this. I learned how to book Grab, and even a flight ticket. If there is anything to be done, I’ll try to do it on my own and be independent.”

(Amir)

“There was once I realised that mom has more things to handle than just me. I guess when I was around 11 or 12 years old. I started to analyse and observe things. I guess that’s when I learned to be more independent and more mature.”

(Rani)

“My dad left us for another woman, and I saw how my mother struggled to raise three boys and a girl. There was once she told me that I would make a great husband or father in the future for my kids. That’s because she can see that I am not like my dad. I learned to be independent and started doing things on my own. Of course, I have not made decisions yet. I will ask my mother first, but you know, I try to do it on my own and not really disturb my mother.”

(Tan)

“My dad is uneducated, and he only works as a guard. So, I try not to ask him for anything unnecessary. I try to use own pocket money to buy things that I need for school projects and homework.”

(Devika)

"I learn to do it on my own. I do not really like to depend on people because I am scared to depend on people. I do not want others to think that I do not have the ability to do things for myself."

(Suri)

Autonomy is a central feature of adolescent development. It plays a key role in the social development of adolescents. Independence is a component of autonomy which is the degree to which individuals are self-reliant and make decisions without input from others (Soenens et al., 2017). Therefore, parents must support and promote independence and volitional functions among their teenage children, as both have a huge impact on teenagers' social adjustment (Benito-Gomez et al., 2020). Study findings by Duineveld et al. (2017) indicate that parental autonomy support decreases depressive symptoms and increases self-esteem among high school students. Thus, maternal and paternal autonomy support is equally important.

4.2.4. Feeling grateful

Sometimes, the students have misunderstandings and arguments with their parents. However, they are grateful as one of their parents is willing to take care of them. They are also grateful because their parents always support and allow them to be independent. Thus, they are thankful to them.

Suri stated that she is grateful to her mother as she always motivates her to study:

"I am really thankful to my mom because she prepares food for me when I do revisions and am busy with tuition and extra classes. She will make coffee for me if I feel sleepy. She will sit down with me and talk to me and give me advice. She tells me not to give up, and if I do not do it right, it is fine. She will give much support and encouraging words to make me feel stronger to face the world."

Tan mentions that he is grateful to his mom that he can do things independently:

"We spend time having conversations over dinner on the stock market and politics, which actually makes me feel more like a man and independent. Moreover, about the future and others, normally, she would guide me to be a better person and that."

Amir is grateful as his mother takes care of him:

"I am happy that my mom raised me. She is a strong woman, raising three boys and a girl. Wow! I do not think she would have done that great if my dad had been around. She is a superwoman."

Devika is thankful that her father raises three daughters without a partner:

"Our mother left us when I was four. My father had to raise us three girls on his own. There were many things that our relatives have said to him and us. You know, like we are going to end up just like our mom and that my father should marry another woman and things like that. However, I am glad that

my father decided not to remarry, and he raised my sisters and me. Now, my aim is to be a good daughter and go to college or university for higher studies and buy a house and a car for my father. My elder sister is already in college, and she is trying hard. I also want to give back to my father for all the things he has done for us.”

Rani is grateful to her mother, who raised her and her younger brother:

“I have an autistic brother who is 14, and he goes to a special needs school. He also must go for medical check-ups, which are sometimes costly. So, my mom must work two jobs. Sometimes I wonder why we do not get to spend time together, and sometimes, being a teenager, I do get angry, but I know that she is working hard without a husband or partner, and she is doing the best and everything for us.

Gratitude is “a sense of appreciation and joy in response to receiving a gift, whether the gift is a tangible benefit from a specific other or a moment of peaceful bliss” (Emmons & Stern, 2013). Participants of this study are happy and gratified to their single parents for taking care of them. Thus, their development as adolescents is positive as they have developed one virtue, which is gratitude. Gratitude development during adolescence is vital, personally, and socially (Baucert et al., 2018). There are many positive benefits of gratitude towards an individual’s well-being, by increasing happiness, health, and other desirable life outcomes. Furthermore, gratitude decreases negative effects and problematic functioning in patients with neuromuscular disease, college students, cancer survivors, health care providers, and early adolescents (Cheng, Tsui, & Lam, 2015; Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Emmons & Stern, 2013; Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008; Otto et al., 2016).

5. Conclusion

The study findings have provided valuable insights into how students from single-parent households experienced and overcame challenges that they faced. Thus, several parties such as teachers, parents, and school counsellors must help the students in dealing with those challenges. Teachers should be more sensitive to the emotional needs of students and always be ready to assist them. Next, parents are suggested to provide more quality time with their children and maintain a positive home environment. Finally, school counsellors should collaborate with teachers and parents to minimise the negative effects of single-parenting on children.

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